

Perspectives on literary reading and book culture

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Published in:

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

DOI:

[10.7771/1481-4374.2239](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2239)

Publication date:

2013

Document Version:

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Vandermeersche, G., Soetaert, R., Rutten, K., & Vandermeersche, G. (2013). Perspectives on literary reading and book culture. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 15(3). <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2239>

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Perspectives on Literary Reading and Book Culture

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Recommended Citation

Vandermeersche, Geert; and Soetaert, Ronald. "Perspectives on Literary Reading and Book Culture." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.3 (2013): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2239>>

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Volume 15 Issue 3 (September 2013) Article 2
Geert Vandermeersche and Ronald Soetaert,
"Perspectives on Literary Reading and Book Culture"
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/2>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 15.3 (2013)**
Thematic Issue **Literacy and Society, Culture, Media, and Education.**
Ed. Kris Rutten and Geert Vandermeersche
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/>>

Abstract: In their article "Perspectives on Literary Reading and Book Culture" Geert Vandermeersche and Ronald Soetaert provide a narrative framework for analyzing literary scholars' argumentation in the debate on literature and the humanities. Starting from MacIntyre's narrative description of epistemic "crises" they analyze the stories authors construct and the positions they take and ascribe to others within larger developing (grand) narratives on the value and function of literary reading. Both traditional narratives and new alternative (i.e., enlarged) narratives are discussed in how they set up and frame the argument and how they create dichotomies.

Geert VANDERMEERSCHE and Ronald SOETAERT

Perspectives on Literary Reading and Book Culture

The most obvious way to start writing on the humanities today seems to be to point to a "crisis." This discourse of "crisis" has been a common thread throughout literary scholars' publications in which they reflect on their own research and those of their peers and is often repeated without much difference. In the 1987 *The Closing of the American Mind* — a landmark of conservative criticism of the university — Allan Bloom claimed that "for modern nations, which have founded themselves on reason in its various uses more than did any nations in the past, a crisis in the university, the home of reason, is perhaps the profoundest crisis they face" (22). This discourse continued in Bill Readings's 1996 *The University in Ruins*: "An internal legitimation struggle concerning the nature of the knowledge produced in the humanities, for example, would not take on crisis proportions were it not accompanied by an external legitimation crisis" (1-2). Today, this kind of discourse seems no less at the forefront, as Martha Nussbaum in her 2010 *Not for Profit* states that: "We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance. ... I mean a crisis that goes largely unnoticed, like a cancer; a crisis that is likely to be, in the long run, far more damaging to the future of democratic self-government: a world-wide crisis in education" (1-2).

Many publications seem content with repeating this discourse of crisis or as Geoffrey Galt Harpman says, "Talk of crisis has been around for so long, however, that it has become simply incorporated into the most accustomed ways in which humanistic scholars understand themselves and their work. Once considered an affliction, crisis has become a way of life" (22). It has become nearly impossible to determine whether these statements point to a "real" problem at the center of the humanities; in fact the talk about the state of the humanities is the core of its legitimation discourse. The question David A. Bell poses, is relevant, but seems almost unanswerable: "has the hypochondriac finally come down with a life-threatening disease?" (6) because, as Richard Lanham says "as so often, the humanities have *created* the 'humanities crisis' they have spent the last century maundering on about" (105). It is of course partly true that "pronouncements of this kind are prompted by real situations and are often specifically designed, however naively, to embarrass governments into changing their policies or making more favourable financial settlements" (Belfiore and Bennett 5). There are however also discourses whose authors transcend these clichéd expressions and seek alternatives for the "crises" of the humanities. Altogether, writing and reflecting on the humanities has become such an essential part of what humanities scholars do, that practice, analysis, and reflection have become inseparable.

In this study, we focus on the current discussion on the value and functions of (literary) reading, the state of the book, and the humanities. There are a myriad of publications that show the present-day arguments scholars from the humanities in general and literary departments in particular use to justify and legitimate their research and practice. The term "crisis" has a specific place within the history and philosophy of science. Rather than seeing a fundamental crisis in our narratives of knowledge as handed down by the Enlightenment (i.e., the German ideal of the university and *Bildung*) as Jean-François Lyotard describes them (31-37), we need an account of how the notion of "crisis" works in the construction of narratives which help scholars describe situations and guide actions. In fact, the authors of these publications often draw on these grand narratives, which contradicts the "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv), while they bemoan simultaneously the "rhetoric of efficiency." Others seize on "crisis" to create new narratives or ways of describing their practice to move away from the old practices of literary theory. These narratives construct various causes for the present situation in the humanities: 1) a collection of financial, political (reforms, cutbacks), economic (neoliberal capitalism, globalization) and institutional (tenure) factor, 2) social (the decreasing standing of the humanities) and ideological (the rise of postmodernism and cultural relativism) causes; 3) technological (the Information Age, internet, digitization) and media (film, television, social media) changes, and 4) the age-old platitude of a generational shift ("today's youth..."). The many scholars who describe a "crisis" expound different accounts of what is happening with the humanities and literary reading: can they still understand what is going on and act?

If we shift the term "crisis" to an "element" of the narrative at the individual level of the scholar, what does the term mean? Alasdair MacIntyre gives an interesting account: "What is an epistemological crisis? ... What [people] took to be evidence pointing unambiguously in some one direction now turns out to have been equally susceptible of rival interpretations. Such a discovery is often paralyzing ... the existence of alternative and rival schemata which yield mutually incompatible accounts of what is going on around him" (4). MacIntyre also describes how we get out from crises: we construct more adequate narratives, or enlarged narratives. He states that "epistemological progress consists in the construction and reconstruction of more adequate narratives" (6-7). So we do not solve the problem, but search for ways around the problem by changing or enlarging our perspective through redescription of the problem (see, e.g., Rorty). Our task as scholars is "to reconstitute, to rewrite that narrative ... into the subject of an enlarged narrative" (5). MacIntyre, however, also underscores the fragility of this new understanding: these narratives "may themselves in turn come to be put in question at any time" (5) and they constitute "the best account which anyone has been able to give so far" (6). As such, in our opinion MacIntyre gives a satisfying account of academic discourses by giving tradition and the individual a place within these epistemic evolutions. A related example to this narrative approach is Stephen Toulmin's 1990 *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* in which he tries to understand "the confusions built into our present conception of Modernity [by] outlin[ing] a revised narrative that can avoid this confusion, and so supersede the standard account" (21).

Additionally, we can be helped by a perspective that focuses on how (disciplinary) conversations and narratives are entwined, how every person (i.e., specific scholars) starts from previous traditions and constructs an ongoing narrative about his/her actions (i.e., research), and how people position themselves and other people. This methodology is called Positioning Theory, which was developed by Rom Harré and Luk Van Langenhove in their 1999 *Positioning Theory: Moral Contexts of Intentional Action*. Positioning Theory is the study of language use, most often conversation, within a "local moral order" of beliefs about actions and speech (1). Harré and Van Langenhove posit a triadic structure of discourse versus position, storyline, and act/action. These three elements are interrelated and constantly influence each other: "the moral positions of the participants and the rights and duties they have to say certain things, the conversational history and the sequence of things already being said, the actual sayings with their power to shape certain aspects of the social world" (6).

Publications which exemplify the narrative of "crisis" within the humanities are nearly endless, but they often repeat the same arguments, as Frank Donaghue states in his 2008 *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*: "the terms of the so-called crisis, from the academic humanist perspective, are always the same" (1). For instance, already in 1958, Hannah Arendt in her "The Crisis in Education" saw "the general crisis that has overtaken the modern world everywhere and in almost every sphere of life" (173). As Donaghue remarks, "crisis is a dramaturgic term, suggesting urgent problems that require immediate heroic solutions" (1), which underpins many academics' positioning of themselves as morally superior to their opponents. If we thus realize the historical continuity and existence of this crisis discourse, "we are compelled to give up the notion of crisis, and to think of that contest very differently than is usually done today ... the terms of today's hostilities are the product of a long evolution" (1). The discourse of crisis in the work of Bloom, Readings, Furedi, and others has solidified over the years. However, the discourse has fulfilled different purposes, because it reacts to different circumstances. For instance, in 1987 Bloom was reacting to the surge in popularity of deconstruction, post-structuralism, and multiculturalism at US-American universities which led students away from "natural" beliefs (27). The word "natural" signals a positioning of his opponents as "unnatural" and this binary dichotomy (relativism versus "real" values) sets up Bloom's narrative that we must return to a curriculum of the "Great Books" (344) to restore the "true" meaning of the humanities.

Questions of the "meaning" of the humanities still take center stage, as in Anthony T. Kronman's 2007 *Education's End* in which he states that "the question of life's meaning [has lost] its status as a subject of organized academic instruction" (7). In Kronman's narrative, this problem has clear causes and culprits and could even lead to an undesirable future. The root of the problem lies in "the growing authority of the modern research ideal and then on account of the culture of political correctness that

has undermined the legitimacy of the question itself and the authority of humanities teachers to ask it" (7). Kronman ups the ante in the discourse of "crisis" by extrapolating the problem to sketch a possible future: "today, the humanities are no merely in a crisis. They are in danger of becoming a laughingstock, both within the academy and outside it" (139). Frank Furedi reaches the same conclusion in his 2009 *Wasted: Why Education Isn't Educating* (2009) by offering an analysis of the supposed erosion of teacher authority through the politicization of curricula and sees a contradiction at the root of our current crisis in education "that the more society invests and expects of education, the less that schools and universities demand of students" (ix). He labels these "investments" (in policy, pedagogy, and especially curricula) as the politicization of education: "Education needs to be saved from those who want to turn it into an all-purpose institution for solving the problems of society" (6). This interest in social problems has led schools to become "distracted from getting on with the task of cultivating the intellectual and moral outlook of children" (19). The only way to uphold authority is through "a competent grasp of an academic discipline" (197) and an understanding of "learning for its own sake" (19). Furedi thus idealizes a more classical education and derides curricula which address social issues. In both books, a dichotomy is drawn between the needs of education and the influence of society: education would be better off if it were an isolated enclave free from social influence.

A book that combines a traditional discourse of "crisis" with a plea for citizenship in our multicultural society is Martha Nussbaum's 2011 *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* which can be seen as an updated version of her 1997 *Cultivating Humanity*. However, the 2011 book has a more pronounced sense of crisis and Nussbaum begins by pointing to "a world-wide crisis in education" (2) caused by the cuts in funding for humanities subjects and research. She draws an opposition between "an education for profit-making and an education for a more inclusive type of citizenship" (7). With the disappearance of these subjects, Nussbaum argues that abilities necessary for citizenship are lost: "the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a 'citizen of the world'; and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person" (7). Her solutions consist of a Socratic pedagogy, where there is "focused attention to the structure of argument" (*Not for Profit* 55, *Cultivating* 30-35) and a cultivation of narrative imagination through literature and the arts. Nussbaum thus describes a narrative in which the "crisis" can only be combatted by "repositioning" an updated classical education which includes rights, duties, and obligations regarding inter- and multiculturalism, gender equality, human and animal rights, etc.

In our opinion a preferred narrative to view the relationship between the humanities and society would emanate from a different positioning. Donaghue proposes that "we ultimately benefit by looking at [the university's problems] through the widest possible lens, and by extending our attention to texts that fall outside the bounds of our intramural conversations" (xiii) and this seems to be one of the strategies scholars use to escape the discourse of crisis: looking over the walls of the humanities at the broader society. A much milder analysis of the intertwining of society and education comes in Harold Shapiro's 2005 *A Larger Sense of Purpose: Higher Education and Society*. He argues that "all social institutions exist in some state of symbiosis with the society of which they are a part" (xii). The university is in constant negotiation (3) about the values and goals with the society that surrounds it: "to think seriously about education is to think about ideal human types for society" (95). Indeed, the current climate of educational "crisis" can only be explained by understanding that "a crisis in education is usually caused by the crisis in society that calls into question many existing ideas regarding the central issues of knowledge, culture and society" (7). Such a "crisis" can lead to meaningful debates, which in turn can lead to meaningful changes in curricula: "these periods of critical reexamination of the university's role and the nature of its educational and scholarly agenda [which] have been key to its social survival and evolution" (xiii). Changes such as globalization "will have significant impacts not only a wide variety of political, cultural, and social institutions, but also on the human narratives that societies have developed to give their community lives some transcendental meaning" (111). The move away from the university as the "ivory tower" toward the university as part of society is also reflected in "campus novels" (see, e.g., Williams). In fact, literature can also be used in university curricula for a better understanding of society and to look over the walls of academia and here are some examples: Arnold Weinstein's 2011 *Morning, Noon, and*

Night: Finding the Meaning of Life's Stages Through Books or Robert Coles's 2010 *Handing One Another Along*, which are based, respectively, on courses at Harvard University and Brown University. Both start with mission statements which underline literature's potential to extend our perspectives outward and beyond the walls of academia.

As the humanities were most entwined with the book and the written word, one could expect that literary scholars fear and perceive a decline in relevance and this has led many scholars to write about a "crisis" of the book (e.g., Birkerts). These defenses of the printed book often reveal a narrative that tells of a complete paradigm shift or total replacement of the book by new media: it is a narrative of media competition with clear winners and losers. There are two sides to this narrative: on the one hand, a feeling of irretrievable loss (e.g., Birkerts) or a triumph of new media. The latter claim that "literate reason and the literary critic have become relics of the past" and that "if you read books, justify it" (Taylor and Saarinen qtd. in Paulson 13) and the former claim appears in reports from the National Endowment for the Arts, such as the 2004 *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* and the 2009 *Reading on the Rise*, which are picked up in many academic publications (see, e.g., Garber). The basic assumption of the first was "that reading books and viewing electronic media are mutually antagonistic experiences that take place in incommensurate, hermetically sealed cultures" (Collins 14, see also *Reading at Risk* xii). The 2009 report, despite painting a more positive picture, is characterized by its "unwilling[ness] to reconsider the relationship between literary reading and electronic media" (Collins 15): it ascribes the resurgence of reading solely to the actions of cultural mediators such as teachers and not to changes in our media-landscape.

Birkerts's *The Gutenberg Elegies* is an example of the narrative of media competition (first published 1994 and a new edition with a new introduction and afterword followed in 2006). The 2006 edition shows the persistence of the narrative of loss regarding literary skills although the context of the author has changed radically. The original 1994 argument rested on the question as to "What is the place of reading, and of the reading sensibility, in our culture as it has become?" (15). Birkerts links the fate (and decline) of reading books to the technological advances in electronic postmodernity: "the printed word is part of a vestigial order that we are moving away from by choice and by societal compulsion ... toward a new world distinguished by its reliance on electronic communications" (118). To Birkerts, what we are losing is linked inextricably to what it means to be human, because reading books is "an agency of self-making" (87) and the rise of digitality entails a "waning of the private self" (130). However, in 2006 Birkerts admits to writing on a computer and living among digital products: he sees himself as "moderately immersed" (236) in the digital world. However, he still holds fast to his belief that "our encompassing, all-saturating technologies are altering our social and private worlds in ways that are, so far at least, resistant to the pattern-making of imagination" (242). Although the digital shift has amplified and the author himself has become part of it, Birkerts holds to his adversarial position within a narrative of loss.

In contrast, these discourse on the crisis of the book have also engendered research into literacy, technology and media which has given us a new narrative of digital humanities and intermediality in which the book and the written word are positioned as one of the many media and technologies. We now understand that "language and culture have been multimodal since the beginning of history as we know it, but also the fact that throughout history the different media have been inter-related in terms of both structure and content, [which] has been a blind spot to the human sciences" (Lehtonen 72). As MacIntyre had already stated, it is in times of "crisis" that what was "natural" is revealed to be contingent: "for the first time [people's schemata] become visible" (4). This enlarged narrative of multi- and intermediality also corresponds to Henry Jenkins's insights on convergence culture: "Each old medium was forced to co-exist with emerging media. That's why convergence seems more plausible as a way of understanding the past several decades of media change than the old digital revolution paradigm had. Old media are not being displaced. Rather their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies" (Jenkins qtd. in Collins 13).

One of the broadest discussion on the effects of intermediality on literary culture is Jim Collins's 2010 *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture became Popular Culture* evidenced by his observation of "the complete redefinition of what literary reading means within the heart of electronic culture" which leads to the introduction of "a new set of players, locations, rituals, and use

values for reading literary fiction" (3). Collins follows Jenkins by looking at "the increasing convergence of literary, visual, and material cultures ... best understood as interdependent components of a popular literary culture" (8). Through analyses of recent literary artifacts from novels to "literary" movies such as *Shakespeare in Love*, Collins argues that "what used to be an exclusively print-based activity — and fiercely proud of it — has become an increasingly image-based activity in which literary reading has been transformed into a variety of possible literary experiences" (4). This narrative broadens the scope of what counts as "literary" and subsumes previous positions as one of the many perspectives on what is happening when we read intermediality is an enlarged narrative. One of the consequences is that other terms are also being redefined. If we take into account the changes in "the sites, delivery systems, and forms of connoisseurship" (2), the notion of 'literacy' itself has to be modified. Collins asks the question as to "what does the transformation of certain forms of literary reading into popular culture suggest about popular literacy, specifically in terms of what readers are now lead to believe they need to know in order to be culturally literate, not by E.D. Hirsch and company, but by television book clubs, superstore bookshops, mall movie adaptations, and literary bestsellers?" (18). The enlarged narrative of intermediality has enabled us to see the book as one of many forms of knowledge transmission. This narrative "is built ... on the interdependency of the print and visual culture" and must reject the narrative of media competition, which sees "a world of books versus wall screens ... an ideology of reading that can accept just one form of literacy and, therefore, must demonize all electronic culture" (265). Another book that fits into this overarching narrative of intermediality is Ted Striphas's *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control* (2009). In it, he sets forth a questioning of "commonsense understandings of a crisis of book culture. Books aren't as imperiled as some critics believe, and in some ways they might even be thriving" (2). In fact, Striphas follows Elizabeth Einstein who sees such "crisis" discourses as an effect of "literary thinking": "those who proclaim the end of what's often referred to as "print culture" tend to do so in ways that reinforce modes of thought, conduct, and expression long associated with printed books" (175). However, this persistence of the book can only be understood within what Striphas, following Jay David Bolter, calls "the late age of print" by which we should understand "a transformation of our social and cultural attitudes toward, and uses of, this familiar technology" (Bolter qtd. in Striphas 3). We can thus continue to accept the role of print media "in shaping habits of thought, conduct, and expression" while seeing simultaneously that "the social, economic, and material coordinates of books have been changing in relation to other media" (3) and in the collected volume *Digital Humanities and the Study of Intermediality in Comparative Cultural Studies*, the editor of the volume Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, argues in a similar way, namely underlying the relevance of digitality as a new form and norm of critical reading and practice:

At a time when many disciplines and fields in the humanities and social sciences are defined as processes of multi-, inter-, and trans-medial construction, interaction, and practice, the development and study of their encounters take on a primary relevance to scholarship and this perspective is a primary point of departure in work presented in the volume at hand. Intermediality is a phenomenon for the creation of new forms of artistic and critical innovation, among others to find ways for their distribution (i.e., open access to scholarship published on the world wide web), new scholarship about intermedial and interdisciplinary perspectives of old and new products of culture, the link(s) of cultural communities in cyberspace, and to be applied as a vehicle for innovative educational practices. Today, discursive practices including visualities form a complex intermedial network of signifying practices which construct realities rather than simple representations of them. Socially constructed meaning or what we call and practice as "culture" take place through processes of the negotiation of stories, images, and meanings; that is, through constructed and contextual agreements, power relations, and their authorization and legitimation of social positions and loci. Therefore, the ways intermedial discursive practices are produced, processed, and transmitted are relevant for research and practice and this occurs, increasingly, in digital humanities. (2)

The central question in many of these publications deals with the effects of the humanities in general and specifically reading literature on the character of the student/reader (see, e.g., Lanham 99). Eleonore Belfiore and Oliver Bennett historicized such "claims" in their 2010 *The Social Impact of the Arts*. One tradition, starting with Plato, points to the negative effects of reading, which is best denied to gullible people. This narrative of literature as "corruption and distraction" is built on cognitive and ethical grounds. It also positions authorities, most often men, as having the duty and obligation to curb and restrict reading for some people, most often women (see, e.g., Jack). Another

recurring narrative in effect says that literature has or should not have a use at all: literature exists as a separate, autonomous sphere from the rest of society. This position rejects any duties, obligations or even rights of the literary reader to "do" something with literature.

Russell A. Berman sees a decline in the humanities, because "today's academic criticism loses its grasp of the specificity of literature, opting instead for a broader and more diffuse notion of culture, it becomes unable — or unwilling — to distinguish the literary work of art from other modes of writing or, even, other sorts of objects altogether" (1). The cause is that "the traditional aesthetic understanding of the term culture — literature and the arts, above all — has gradually been displaced by an ethnographic definition: the values and practices of a community" (2). The result is that "we lose the critical potential of literature" (3) and that the specific rationale for a separate discipline for literary studies is lost. In Berman's historic narrative on the rise of narrative it is "autonomy — the constitutive distinctiveness of imaginative literature that implies a complex and multidimensional temporality — is central to a long history of civilization" (10). There is a clear dichotomy here between seeing literature as a practice and literature as an autonomous sphere apart from society, which is so prevalent in academic circles.

In *The Use and Abuse of Literature* Marjorie Garber repeats many of the basic arguments for what can be called "academic reading." Although she sees reading as a way of thinking, it does not offer closure, it should not be "applied" to the outside world and it should be "useless." Garber defines the object of literature as "a status rather than a quality. To say that a text or a body of work is literature means that it is regarded, studied, read, and analyzed in a literary way" (127). Literature are thus those objects which are approached or read in a literary way: implicit here is the strong determinant of the academic context ("studied," "analyzed") in the process. With regard to the practice of reading, Garber states paradoxically that she "will attempt not only to argue for but also to invoke and demonstrate the 'uses' of reading and of literature, not as an instrument of moral or cultural control, nor yet as an infusion of 'pleasure,' but rather as a way of thinking [and to explain] why the very uselessness of literature is its most profound and valuable attribute" (7). Against George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's and Mark Turner's research on literature and cognition, Garber charges that they "sweep the literary away" (261), while she stresses "the specificity of literature and literary reading" (15). She defends the idea that "literature is a first-order, not a second-order, phenomenon. ... It does not merely frame concepts or conceptual metaphors ... concepts are created by the imaginative leaps that we call poetry or fiction or rhetoric" (276). The main characteristic of literary reading is thus an ongoing production of meaning, without closure: "To open questions, not to close them" is what makes literature "both unique and also 'useless' in contrast with problem-solving disciplines" (284). Furthermore, Garber equates the lack of closure on the level of interpretation with the supposed lack of closure of literature as a textual object (309; for arguments for textual closure see, e.g., Booth). This is reflected in the kind of reading and reader Garber puts forth as an ideal when she returns to practice "close reading or slow reading or reading in slow motion" (169). She follows Paul de Man in the idea that "language, in all its waywardness, slows down and diverts the goal of identifying a 'meaning' ... This is why close reading is 'subversive': what it subverts is a rush to a corresponding meaning outside the text" (177). Is this an explicit plea for a kind of reading that closes itself off from "reality" and remains sequestered from it? Garber recognizes that readers often make the works feel "present" to themselves (189) and that literature can be influenced by context. However, Garber denounces reading that applies literary meaning to things outside of the text as an "abuse": "we do literature a real disservice if we reduce it to knowledge or to use, to a problem to be solved. If literature solves problems, it does so by its own inexhaustibility, and by its ultimate refusal to be applied or used, even for moral good. This refusal, indeed, is literature's most moral act" (32). It is unclear whether Garber believes that her own plea for the uses of uselessness transcends her own insight into "the powerful rhetorical logic of use and abuse as the way of framing an argument ... no use without abuse; no abuse with uses. The phrase as a container, and as a loci, sets the stage for the kind of debate and dialectic that will ensue" (36). What is clear is that an argument based on the uses of uselessness is a muddled one.

The narrow narrative thus sees reading as sequestered from society and as having only a single aesthetic function. In the last few years, scholars have sought to re-position reading and to determine

the uses of different ways of reading. One of the best examples of this re-orientation is Rita Felski's 2008 *Uses of Literature* in which she justifies her approach by pointing to institutional factors such as students "migrating in droves toward vocationally oriented degrees" (2). Further, Felski positions herself as outside an old ideology in academia: "There is a dawning sense among literary and cultural critics that a shape of thought has grown old. We know only too well the well-oiled machine of ideology critique, the x-ray gaze of symptomatic reading, the smoothly rehearsed moves that add up to a hermeneutics of suspicion. ... More and more critics are venturing to ask what is lost when a dialogue with literature gives way to a permanent diagnosis, when the remedial reading of texts loses all sight of why we are drawn to such texts in the first place" (1). She positions herself as part of a growing group pitted against a kind of reading that is clinical (note the medical metaphors). The overemphasis on critical reading has alienated the common reader and is detrimental to the humanities. This dichotomy starts her narrative and leads to a call "to engage seriously with ordinary motives for reading" (14). She distinguishes four reasons to read: 1) "recognition: the widespread belief that we learn something about ourselves in the act of reading" (12), 2) the feeling of enchantment, which she describes as a "total absorption in a text, of intense and enigmatic pleasure" (54), 3) we gain knowledge from texts through "what literature discloses about the world beyond the self, to what it reveals about people and things, mores and manners, symbolic meanings and social stratification" (83), and 4) there is the experience of shock, which ruptures "familiar frames of reference" (105). As such, Felski offers us an enlarged script of what readers can do.

This re-orientation on ordinary motives also allows for a better sociological analysis of literary culture as Timothy Aubry undertakes in his 2011 *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans*. Aubry's analysis of Oprah's book club shows that "many readers in the United States today treat novels less as a source of aesthetic satisfaction than as a practical dispenser of advice or a form of therapy. They choose books that will offer strategies for confronting, understanding, and managing their personal problems" (1). This "therapeutic turn" entails that readers "find personal relevance in the books they read" through identification with characters (17). Not only does this analysis place Aubry in opposition with Garber, but with much of academia: "many intellectuals view the urge to identify with fictional characters as a naive surrender of critical distance" (1). Aubry broadens his scope and is more interested in "what novels are doing for readers, especially in contexts outside of the university" (41) and finds that in contrast to academic perceptions this genre of mainstream fiction develops readers' searches for "unlikely forms of sympathy among strangers" (2; e.g., reading groups). It is an attempt, just as Collins's book, to take "the middle-brow" seriously. It may not be artistically subversive, but may prove to be "more flexible, more capable of accommodating critical, sophisticated modes of thought, and more open to communal aspirations than the left generally acknowledges" (Aubry 12). Our normal understanding of common terms such "private" and "public" will have to be rethought in the light of this therapeutic fiction. This view also falls back on other theoretical traditions: Kenneth Burke's concept of equipment for living or Wayne Booth's the "company we keep." Aubry also points to difficulties in the readership of this genre, for example its discomfort with difficult fiction and the fact that this approach "internalizes problems" (201). This repertoire of functions of reading, however, is also being re-introduced in academic courses: in his 2011 *Morning, Noon, and Night* Arnold Weinstein states his central tenet is that "we can find our form in books" (5) and that literature becomes "a tool of personal discovery, indeed as a purchase on our own evolving form" (6). The same function for literature appears in Coles's *Handing One another Along*: "to search deeper into an understanding of what we make of our own stories, and of this world in which we live every day" (xvii). This kind of reading is closer to the question that is now also gaining ground in philosophy versus the art of living and incorporates Kronman's concerns: "All of these books, in various ways, treat these questions: How does one live a life? What kind of a life? And for what purpose?" (181).

In conclusion, the above survey of selected English-language books suggests that three themes dominate in the debate on the humanities: 1) the so-called "crisis" in educational institutions, 2) the influence of new media on the "old" technology of the book, and 3) the focus on the reader and meaning-making. Publications can be clustered into two groups. On the one hand, discourses which seem to hold on or want to return to an "older" narrative which often entails seeing the university as a

protected enclave apart from larger society, a narrow conception of literature as only consisting of print books and a narrowly defined aesthetic, and univocal function for reading. According to the scholarship in these publications, the humanities have to be defended from outside intruders (e.g., new media). On the other hand, there are scholars who try to construct new "scripts" and positions to construct insights from media studies, sociology, philosophical pragmatism, cultural studies, etc. New narratives emerge and they often rely on the strategy of enlarging the scope of research by seeing the university as benefiting from the confrontation with society, broadening literature to include other media, and acknowledging the validity of different ways of reading.

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